

## Wexner Center's summer exhibits a reflection of self, social justice

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At a talk Friday night previewing the Wexner Center for the Art's newest exhibitions featuring the work of photographer Catherine Opie and painter Jack Whitten, art critic and moderator Tyler Green noted the differences between the two artists.

"Jack is from steel country in Alabama. Cathy is from farm town Ohio," Green said. "Jack is a straight black man, Cathy is not."

The audience laughed and both artists smiled and nodded their heads.

Opie's exhibition, titled "Catherine Opie: Portraits and Landscapes," includes about 50 pieces that provide formal portraits of Opie's friends and people she admires alongside almost abstract depictions of nature.

In the portraits, the subjects are set against a deep black background — so deep it at times seems to envelope them. The use of shadow and light heightens the contrast, highlighting the subjects' skin that displays character traits such as tan lines and tattoos.

The portraits are broken up, often four at a time, by large landscape photographs. But they aren't crisp photos where one can see each leaf on a tree or blade of grass on the prairie. Instead the viewer gets the feeling that they just woke up and are squinting at a landscape that is not quite in focus yet.

The constant switching between clear and blurry, edgy and serene, offers an interesting perspective in the gallery.

"Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting" includes more than 60 of Whitten's works, making it, according to a press release from the Wexner Center, "the first career-spanning retrospective of the groundbreaking artist."

Whitten's pieces are sometimes geometric and methodical while others offer new takes on iconic images. When walking up the ramp in the Wexner Center galleries, one sees on the far wall what appears to be a giant iPhone screen. Instead it is Whitten's piece, titled "Apps for Obama," that takes the simple design to a different level with detailed painting.

"I find the work incredibly complimentary," said Sherri Geldin, director of the Wexner Center, of the collections before the talk. "It's so nice when you have crazy galleries like we do at the Wexner, where there's a kind of shared air space so there's really never a sense that anything is completely unto itself. To have (the art), not talking exactly, but I think whispering and subtly hinting, it's really, really lovely."

Those whispers echoing through the corridors and galleries of the Wexner Center are likely ones discussing issues of social justice, a common thread Green pointed out between the two artists' works.

Opie, who was a member of both ACT UP and Queer Nation, said she began taking portraits of her friends



A self-portrait of Catherine Opie whose work will be on display at the Wexner Center for the Arts until Aug. 2. Credit: Courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

because she was afraid they were all going to disappear on her as they battled with AIDS.

"In creating the portraits, it was the beginning of trying to wrestle with what wasn't being represented, that I felt needed to be represented," Opie said.

She added that she also felt the need to become more involved than just the one behind the camera.

"When I was making the portraits early on of my friends, I felt that if I wasn't going to identify myself in relationship to queer culture that it would be a problem that I was only letting my friends represent," Opie said, "as opposed to including myself into that conversation."

Whitten's earliest paintings were inspired by the "tumultuous era" of the 1960s, according to a Wexner Center press release, reacting to the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the endeavors of Martin Luther King Jr.



Jack Whitten's "Psychic Eclipse, 1964" is one of his pieces on display at the Wexner Center for the Arts until Aug. 2.

Credit: Jack Whitten/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

During the talk, Whitten recounted a story he heard as a boy of a black man who was jailed in Clarkston, Alabama for attempting to burn down a church. A mob formed in the jail's courtyard calling for him to be lynched, when a thunderstorm rolled in. A bolt of lightning hit the man's cell window, killing him. But the lightning etched his image into the glass, creating a ghost-like effect.

This story inspired him when creating his self-portraits, including "Psychic Eclipse" and "Hide and Seek," that have a haunting, mystic appearance.

"Making self-portraits is a universal concept," Whitten said. "It's a time where we stop and take stock of ourselves. From a more philosophical basis, I think of it as trying to visualize what I mean by being here ... It's a way of me stopping, taking a look at myself, tearing myself apart to try to answer the question, 'Why am I here?'"

The exhibitions will be on display until Aug. 2 at the Wexner Center.